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AUTHOR	Seitz, James E.
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ABSTRACT

Because of its association with the first-year writing course and with what is presumed to be a practical rather than an intellectual function, the composition curriculum has long been regarded as devoid of "content." The result of this emphasis on practice and process is a curriculum in which subject matter has been deemed largely irrelevant. Today, however, in many respects composition looks more and more like other disciplines, particularly in the realm of curriculum. The first-year course remains that place in the curriculum where composition endures without a subject--or rather, with any subject the teacher or student provides--and for that reason, is still the most intriguing site for imagining alternative conceptions of "content." For example, most sections of the first-year composition course at the University of Pittsburgh have no preassigned subject matter, and hence the reading materials in different sections of the course vary greatly during any given semester. Perhaps a term to be used may be "inquiry"--where writing is inquiry, and inquiry the dynamic, critical process that generates recognition, insight, and understanding. (NKA)

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Content and the Composition Curriculum

James E. Seitz
University of Pittsburgh

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I'd like to use this talk as an occasion for thinking about a feature of the composition curriculum that sets it apart from curricula in other disciplines—namely, the fact that, because of its association with the first-year writing course and with what is presumed to be a practical rather than an intellectual function, the composition curriculum has long been regarded as devoid of "content." Unlike other disciplines, which present themselves as teaching a body of "material" (that is, substantive knowledge *about* an area of study), composition has largely presented itself, particularly in the first-year course but often in advanced writing courses as well, as teaching a practice, or a process, or a method of inquiry. The result of this emphasis on practice and process is a curriculum in which subject matter has been deemed largely irrelevant. Open virtually any first-year composition textbook and you'll see what I mean: students are invited to read and write about family or work or media or government or history or sports or cultural theory or the environment or anything under the sun, and the reason is because, however much one teacher may prefer this subject to that, the field as a whole presumes that subject matter, at least in the first-year course, *doesn't* matter: what matters is what you do with

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it. As David Bartholomae put it in his 4 C's chair's address of 1988, composition is a "subject-less" discipline, one that challenges the conventional ways in which a discipline conceives itself.

Of course, the profound institutional paradox those of us in composition confront is that our subject-less status enables us both to feel more enlightened than other disciplines, whom we imagine to be mired in banking conceptions of education, and at the same time to feel more excluded by those within the academy who don't understand how a discipline without content can be a legitimate discipline. Bartholomae's address was a plea to the field to accept this paradox and to make productive use of its tensions—to hold on to our difference from other disciplines and engage in an alternative curriculum.

I don't think things are turning out as Bartholomae hoped, for it appears that in many respects composition looks more and more like other disciplines, particularly in the realm of curriculum. What has happened alongside other changes during the past decade is that the "content" or subject matter that composition initially developed in the graduate curriculum, where the field has since the 1970s claimed a body of knowledge about writing, rhetoric, and literacy that graduate students are expected to study as in other disciplines, is now moving into the undergraduate curriculum in the form of upper-division courses. Until recently, one wouldn't expect students to have studied composition *as a field* before arriving at graduate school; but now more and more incoming graduate students have already taken courses in literacy studies or the

history of rhetoric or composition theory as undergraduates, where they have not only engaged in writing as a practice but have also examined writing or rhetoric or literacy as fields of study that now offer professionalized paths into the academy. My guess is that soon there will be increasing pressure to teach the first-year course in a similar way—not merely as a place to hone one's writing regardless of subject matter, but a place where one is given an introduction to scholarship *about* writing as well. In other words, there may well come a push to provide the first-year curriculum with disciplinary content—not with any subject one chooses but rather with a subject that reflects the knowledge-building of scholars in the field, as is now becoming the case in the upper-division curriculum.

In the meanwhile, the first-year course remains that place in the curriculum where composition endures without a subject—or rather, with any subject the teacher or student provides--and for that reason, though some in the field now represent the first-year course as the noose around our neck, it is in many ways still the most intriguing site for imagining alternative conceptions of "content." But it is also a site where writing is always in danger of being set aside by whatever content comes to the fore, as is the case in the program I recently began to direct at the University of Pittsburgh.

Most sections of our first-year composition course at Pitt have no pre-assigned subject matter, and hence the reading material in different sections of the course varies wildly during any given semester. As at many other

institutions, a student who registers for first-year composition has no idea whether her section of the course will concentrate on confessional poetry or Marxist theory or the writings of Gertrude Stein (among countless other possibilities), since except for first-year TAs, who teach from a common syllabus, each teacher creates her own reading list. Recently, our curriculum committee has discussed giving titles to individual sections of the course that would make its "content" apparent in the course catalogue students consult when they register, so that they could select a version of freshman writing that meets their own interests. We already offer special sections whose titles announce their focus on film or women's studies or education, and the idea is to identify more, and perhaps all, of our first-year courses in this way.

While I think one problem with this plan stems from its complicity with a nationwide trend to figure college students as customers who need plenty of information about a product before they buy it, the more pressing concern for today's discussion is how such an approach to the curriculum can encourage teachers to develop courses in which writing becomes a mere adjunct to the "topic" placed at the center—much like "writing-intensive" courses taught in other disciplines. Without denying that writing-intensive courses have much to offer the college curriculum, I question whether the composition curriculum shouldn't approach writing as something more than an aid in the study of whatever subject is supposedly the real attraction. My worry, in other words, lies with how easily a focus on writing gets displaced by a focus on course

content, thereby returning writing to the role of a skill, a tool, a packet of strategies for manipulating the real substance at hand.

But here, with time running out, I want to stop and examine the way I've been referring to "content," as if it were a lump of material that a discipline holds in its hands and passes on to students through its curriculum. In an e-mail message sent last year when those of us on this panel were first sharing our ideas, Judy Goleman noted that she would like to "read the form/content split in a way that does not itself reproduce this killer dichotomy." As I tried any number of times during the past few weeks to write this paper, I kept finding, over and over again, that I was unable to attain the goal that Judy so eloquently identified, as is apparent in my remarks thus far about the role of content in the composition curriculum. It seems that simply to name content "content" is already to set it apart as substance, not style, as matter, not method, as inertia, not motion.

What I'm hoping we can begin to think through this morning are ways to conceive the composition curriculum that help us to avoid reproducing killer dichotomies such as form versus content or shape versus substance or writing versus subject—particularly in the first-year course, where the field's disciplinary ambitions have not yet delimited the possibilities. We need, I believe, a third term that attempts to name both sides of the coin at once, much as "praxis" refers to both theory and practice, not to one or the other in isolation. For me, that term may be *inquiry*—where writing *is* inquiry, and inquiry the dynamic, critical

process that generates recognition, insight, and understanding--though I'll admit that this idea is a work in progress, one I look forward to exploring further in our discussion this morning.

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Date 7/25/02	# of pages ▶ 1
From James Seitz	
Co. Univ. of Pittsburgh	
Phone #	Phone # 412 [redacted] 624-6521
Fax # 812-856-5512	Fax # 412-624-6639

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Signature: James E. Seitz
Organization/Address: Dept. of English, Univ. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA 15260

Printed Name/Position/Title: James E. Seitz
Telephone: 412-624-6521 Fax: 412-624-6639
E-mail Address: seitz@pitt.edu Date: 7.17.02

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